

# Tarzan of the Apes Study Guide

*Tarzan of the Apes* is a novel written by Edgar Rice Burroughs, the first in a series of books about the title character Tarzan. It was first published in the pulp magazine *All-Story Magazine* in October, 1912; the first book edition was published in 1914. The character was so popular that Burroughs continued the series into the 1940s with two dozen sequels. For the novel's centennial anniversary, Library of America will be publishing a hardcover edition based on the original book in April 2012 with an introduction by Thomas Mallon (ISBN 978-1-59853-164-0).

## Plot summary

The novel tells the story of John Clayton, born in the western coastal jungles of equatorial Africa to a marooned couple from England, John and Alice (Rutherford) Clayton, Lord and Lady Greystoke. Adopted as an infant by the she-ape Kala after his parents die (his mother dies of natural causes, presumably childbirth and his father is killed by the savage king ape Kerchak), Clayton is named "Tarzan" ("White Skin" in the ape language) and raised in ignorance of his human heritage.

Feeling alienated from his peers due to their physical differences, he discovers his true parents' cabin, where he first learns of others like himself in their books, with which he eventually teaches himself to read.

On his return from one visit to the cabin, he is attacked by a huge gorilla which he manages to kill with his father's knife, although he is terribly wounded in the struggle. As he grows up, Tarzan becomes a skilled hunter, gradually arousing the jealousy of Kerchak, the ape leader.

Later, an African tribe settles in the area, and Kala is killed by one of its hunters. Avenging himself on the killer, Tarzan begins an antagonistic relationship with the tribe, raiding its village for weapons and practicing cruel pranks on them. They, in turn, regard him as an evil spirit and attempt to placate him.

The twelve short stories Burroughs wrote later and collected as *Jungle Tales of Tarzan* occur in the period immediately following the arrival of the natives, the killing of Kala, and Tarzan's vengeance.

Finally Tarzan has amassed so much credit among the apes of the tribe that the envious Kerchak at last attacks him. In the ensuing battle Tarzan kills Kerchak and takes his place as "king" of the apes.

Subsequently, a new party of whites is marooned on the coast, including Jane Porter, the first white woman Tarzan has ever seen. Tarzan's cousin, William Cecil Clayton, unwitting usurper of the ape man's ancestral English estate, is also among the party. Tarzan spies on the newcomers, aids them, and saves Jane from the perils of the jungle. Absent when they are rescued, he is introduced further into the mysteries of civilization by French Naval Officer Paul D'Arnot, whom he saves from the natives. D'Arnot teaches Tarzan French and how to behave among white men, as well as serving as his guide to the nearest colonial outposts.

Ultimately, Tarzan travels to Jane's native Baltimore, Maryland only to find that she is now in the woods of Wisconsin. Tarzan finally meets Jane in Wisconsin where they renew their acquaintance and he learns the bitter news that she has become engaged to William Clayton. Meanwhile, clues from his parents' cabin have enabled D'Arnot to prove Tarzan's true identity. Instead of claiming his inheritance, Tarzan chooses to conceal his identity and renounce his heritage for the sake of Jane's happiness.

## Film adaptations

Burroughs' novel has been the basis of several movies. The first two were the silent films *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918) and *The Romance of Tarzan* (1918), both starring Elmo Lincoln as Tarzan, based on the first and second parts of the novel, respectively. The next and most famous adaptation was *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932), starring Johnny Weissmuller, who went on to star in eleven other Tarzan films. Clayton was substituted by Harry Holt. It was remade twice, as *Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1959), featuring Denny Miller, and *Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1981), with Miles O'Keeffe as Tarzan and Bo Derek as Jane. Three more movie adaptations have been made to date; *Greystoke - The Legend of Tarzan, Lord of the Apes* (1984), a film starring Christopher Lambert that is more faithful to the book, *Tarzan of the Apes* (1999), a direct to video animated film, and *Tarzan* (1999), a Disney animated film with Tony Goldwyn as the voice of Tarzan.

A number of Burroughs' other Tarzan novels have also been adapted for the screen. Numerous Tarzan films have been made with no connection to his writings other than the character.

### Comic adaptations

The book has been adapted into comic form on a number of occasions, both in the original Tarzan comic strip and comic books. The strip itself began with Hal Foster's adaptation of the story. Notable adaptations into comic book form include those of Gold Key Comics in *Tarzan* no. 155 (script by Gaylord DuBois, art by Russ Manning), dated September 1966 (reprinted in no. 178, dated October 1969), DC Comics in *Tarzan* nos. 207-210, dated April–July 1972, and Marvel in *Tarzan Super Special* no. 1 (reprinted in *Tarzan of the Apes* nos. 1-2, dated July–August 1984). Probably the most prestigious comic version, however, was illustrator and former *Tarzan* comic strip artist Burne Hogarth's 1972 adaptation of the first half of the book into his showcase graphic novel *Tarzan of the Apes*. (Hogarth subsequently followed up with another graphic novel *Jungle Tales of Tarzan* (1976), which adapted four stories from Burroughs' identically titled collection of Tarzan stories). Dynamite Entertainment have adapted the story for the first 6 issues of *Lord of the Jungle*, albeit loosely; for example, the cannibal tribe was replaced by a village of literal apemen.

### First, some background about the author . . .

When Edgar Rice Burroughs wrote *Tarzan* in 1912 he was literally working for the system, writing an advice column for a small business magazine called the *SYSTEM*.

“ I knew little or nothing about business,” he later recalled. “ I had failed in every enterprise I had ever attempted and could not have given valuable advice to a peanut vendor.”

Instead he gave vague, portentous pronouncements aided by impressive, if irrelevant charts and graphs.

“ Ethically,” he admitted, “ it was about two steps below the patent medicine business” (a historically corrupt vocation of snake oil salesmen who were shut down by the Pure Food and Drug Law in 1906).

Burroughs' boss was “ an overbearing, egotistical ass with the business morality of peep show proprietor.”

Writing *Tarzan* was an act of self-liberation. He would comment later of its enormous appeal:

“ We wish to escape not alone the narrow confines of city streets for the freedom of the wilderness, but the restrictions of man made laws, and the inhibitions that society has placed on us. We like to picture ourselves as roaming free, the lords of ourselves and of our world, in other words, we would each like to be Tarzan. At least I would. I admit it.”

**So, *Tarzan* is much more than a goofy adventure story. As you read the book consider the following overarching questions:**

1. By writing a story about a character like Tarzan, what is Burroughs telling us about what he considers the “ ideal man” ?
2. What qualities does Burroughs believe one should find in a “ true man” ? How does Tarzan demonstrate these qualities?
3. What is Burroughs’ judgment of what some might call “ civilized” society? Is it pro, con, or something in between, meaning does he see both good and bad attributes in modern society? Which characters represent the harmful effects of “ over-civilization” in the novel?
4. Why would this book appeal to men like Burroughs, working within “ the system” ? What had happened to masculinity by the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? What had corrupted it? What was the remedy? (Think of the changes that had taken place in the workplace for both laborers and middle managers.)
5. In the novel, why do violent episodes occur? What causes them? Do only “ bad” characters engage in violence? To what extent is violence acceptable or even laudable?
6. What role does nature (heredity or “ blood” ) play in a man’ s development? What role does nurture (experience) play? How do Burroughs’ views on this issue differ from Twain’ s?
7. What does Burroughs think about race? What unquestioned assumptions does he seem to make? Does he ever portray his own race in a negative fashion?
8. To what extent does Jane have an effect on Tarzan? Is she a “ civilizing” force? How does Tarzan affect Jane?

9. How does *primitivism* differ from *savagery*? In the novel, who is “primitive” and who is “savage”? Why does Burroughs think the distinction between the two is important?
10. How does Burroughs portray Africa in the novel? Why could one say it is portrayed less as an actual place and more as the setting in which Burroughs introduces his ideas about race?
11. How do you think Burroughs felt about colonialism and imperialism? Does Tarzan reject or embrace the so-called White Man’s Burden?

**The following more specific questions should help guide you through the reading and prepare you for the quiz. There are generally listed in the order they appear in the book.**

1. Why John Clayton is being sent to Africa? What might this suggest about Burroughs feelings toward imperialism?
2. What qualities separate John Clayton, Lord Greystoke, from the members of the crew of the *Fuwald*? What accounts for this difference?
3. How does the abandoned couple deal with their first experience with a great Ape? How does the reaction of Lord Greystoke differ from that of his wife?
4. Who does Tarzan believe is his mother? Why is she so devoted to him? How does Burroughs characterize their relationship?
5. Why does the young Tarzan feel himself so inferior to his Great Ape companions?
6. When Tarzan discovers his parents’ cabin, what intrigues him most about its contents?
7. What “technology” does Tarzan employ to kill Tublat? In what other ways does he show himself to be superior to his Ape family?

8. What “hideous” things does man wear that signifies his superiority over the apes? How does Tarzan learn about this?
9. How does Burroughs describe the native blacks? What does Burroughs suggest contributes to their savagery? What corrupting influence have they removed themselves from?
10. Why and how does Tarzan kill the native Kulonga? What makes this episode seem particularly racist?
11. After Tarzan kills the native Kulonga, what strange reaction comes over him? What influence is affecting Tarzan’ s behavior?
12. What is odd about Lord Greystoke’ s diary? Why did he keep it in the manner that he did?
13. With what act does Tarzan proclaim himself “ King of the Apes?”
14. How does he subdue Terkoz? Why doesn’ t he kill him when he has the chance?
15. Why does Tarzan renounce his position as King of the Apes? What does he want to do instead?
16. How would you describe the crew that deposited the Porter/Clayton party on the beach? How do the stark differences between the crew and the party reveal Burroughs own views?
17. How does Tarzan communicate with the white people he sees on the beach? How does he warn them not to disturb the belongings in his house?
18. Describe Clayton and Miss Porter and Esmeralda’ s first day in Africa. How does Esmeralda’ s behavior differ from Jane Porter’ s? Describe Esmeralda as a character.
19. What is the purpose for including Archimedes Q. Porter and Philander into the story? Why are these two men so ill-suited to survive in the jungle?

20. What was the Professor' s reaction to being chased by a lion? What does he plan to do about it? What is his catch phrase?
21. What fate is " worse than death" and who might suffer it?
22. After Tarzan saves Jane from Terkoz, how does she react? Why? What conflicting forces are at war within her?
23. How is Tarzan affected by Jane' s presence? What " right" does he choose not to exercise? What roles do Nature and Nurture play in his relationship with Jane?
24. What does Jane do in the jungle to help introduce Tarzan to his ancestors? What is his reaction?
25. What nationality are the leaders of the mission to rescue Jane? Why are they so committed to helping a woman they have never met?
26. What are the natives preparing to do to d' Arnot? What is he determined to teach them?
27. How are the French rescuers able to overpower the native blacks? What larger point is Burroughs making about colonialism? What is civilization' s great equalizer against poorly developed peoples?
28. How does Clayton attempt to discredit Tarzan in Jane' s eyes? To what extent does she believe him?
29. While d' Arnot recuperates, how do he and Tarzan spend their time?
30. Why does Jane not make the connection between the man she knows as her wild jungle savior and the man who calls himself Tarzan of the Apes?
31. How is Tarzan' s family background finally established? Why, in the end, does he not make it known to Jane?